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‘One Belt, One Road’ and the Middle East in China:
Yemeni Community in a Transregional Circuit

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‘One Belt, One Road’ and the Middle East in China:
Yemeni Community in a Transregional Circuit*

Wai-Yip Ho

Abstract

Through the case-study of emerging Yemeni diasporic community in China, this paper explores the China-Middle East relationship by seeking a full transregional circuit of everyday life and relationship between 'China in the Middle East' and 'the Middle East in China' from the age of Cold War till China's global initiative of 'One Belt, One Road'. Based on a multi-sited ethnography conducted in Yemen and China, on the one hand, explains the strong China's humanitarian reliefs, infrastructure and other aid projects have laid good foundation of the ongoing Chinese presence in Yemen. On the other hand, this paper explores pulling factors that explains growing Yemenis presence in China. By doing so, the presence and the growing public visibility of the 'Arab world in China' as well as 'China in the Arab world' will be underlined, so that a full circuit and asymmetrical relationship of the new Silk Road network can be better understood in future.

‘The Middle East in China’ and ‘China in the Middle East’

“Seek Knowledge, even unto China”

Hadith of Prophet Muhammad

“The ancient Silk Road more than 2,000 years ago served as a belt for China-Arab friendship and provided peace and prosperity for China and the Arab world. Facing the future, let us join hands, move forward along the footprints of history, adapt ourselves to the trend of the era, and continue to forge ahead along the bright road towards a lasting peace and prosperity.”

Former China Premier Wen
Jiabao’s speech at China-Arab
Meeting¹

As a result of China’s new global initiative, ‘One Belt, One Road’ (also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI), reaching the world, one of the groundbreaking directions in China’s foreign policy is the cultivation of a new alignment and growing involvement in the Middle East and Africa. Leading scholarly interests explain the strategic and geopolitical considerations of China’s new regional presence as being primarily driven by energy resources, economics and other diplomatic interests. Due to China’s foreign policy of seeking natural resources and energy-driven diplomacy for continuous domestic economic growth, there are many interests in

China’s engagement in Africa and the Middle East. However, China’s growing presence in the region is neither without contestation nor challenges. Optimistically, unlike the West’s troubled history in the Gulf, China’s opportune presence is facilitated by the absence of an imperial record similar to that of the West, any political baggage, the growing need for mutual dependence between China and the Middle East as well as the fact that Chinese have a high degree of credibility in the eyes of the Arab and Muslim world.² As a rising superpower comparable to the United States and Soviet Union in the Cold War era, scholars have been focusing on the global power shift in the Middle East: East Asia’s and China’s growing potential political, strategic role and the arms trade in the Middle East³ as well as East Asia’s growing energy dependence on the Middle East.⁴ However, China’s growing economic cooperation with the Middle East has been hesitant due to America’s suspicions, the infiltration of radical Islam into this realm, as well as the continuing tensions in Israeli-Palestinian relations. All these factors have consequently resulted in China’s economic presence but reluctance in political involvement with the Middle East. As China is understood as a rising economic giant but at the same time a political dwarf in the Middle East,⁵ it is nonetheless interesting that others worry China will become the new colonial power in the region, as reported by the Western media, and especially in Africa. Whether China diverges

from the Western colonial hegemony needs to be explored, but initial findings show variegated and complex opinions about China's presence in Africa among African respondents.⁶ While debates about China's stance either constrained involvement or aggressive 'neo-colonialism' continues, discourses like 'China-in-Africa' or China in the Middle East has been strategically important but still ambivalent and inconclusive.⁷ However, 'China in the Middle East' partially covers that transregional circuit, but the 'the Middle East in China' is an emerging topic that requires deeper investigation. Due to the insufficient attention paid to the relationship and the impact on everyday lives and encounters with 'China in the Middle East' and the 'the Middle East in China', this paper suggests a new research agenda including a full transregional circuit of the Sino-Middle East relationship.

Transregional Circuit: China's Middle East Turn & Inter-Asian Connections

By considering 'China in the Middle East' and the 'the Middle East in China', this paper focuses on the case of China-Yemen relations by tracing the historical importance of socialist legacy and Chinese humanitarian aid to explain the strong ties between contemporary Yemen and China. Besides the Chinese role in Yemen, this paper initiates an exploration of the reverse movement

of a Yemeni presence in China, which has often been ignored or at least undervalued, except a few important and innovative studies highlighting the Arab world or the Middle East gradually rediscovering China in the revival of silk road,⁸ namely China's new initiative of 'One Belt, One Road'. While it is important to observe China's growing presence in the Arab world, this paper considers another direction and initiates a discussion of the growing presence of Arabs in China.

"Seek Knowledge even unto China" is one of the most quoted hadiths, though it is judged as a weak hadith or even suspected to be fabricated, this famous hadith reflects Arab Muslims' early contact and their primordial territorial imagination traveling from Middle East to China since 7th century⁹ and it powerfully invokes a revival of silk road connections. Methodologically, this proposes a multi-sited ethnography¹⁰ suggesting that a balanced account and comprehensive understanding of a new Silk Road network includes a full circulation of 'China in the Arab world' as well as 'Arab world in China'. Based on my participant observation and interviews about an increasing presence of Yemeni community in China, rather than only focusing on an unidirectional flow of people and cultures by methodologically single-sited fieldwork studying China in the Arab world, I propose to include a study of the 'Arab world in China' in order to theorize a full circuit of Silk Road revival. By deploying multi-sited fieldwork

exploring both case studies of ‘Yemenis in China’ and ‘Chinese in Yemen’ in the capital cities (Sana’a and Beijing) and two important coastal cities of the maritime silk route (Aden and Guangzhou) in Yemen and China respectively, this paper highlights the emerging inter-Asian connections in the growing nexus between East Asia and the Middle East long after the legacy of Zheng He’s navigation in the Ming Dynasty.¹¹ On one side, factors like China’s increasing energy dependency on the Middle East (such as Saudi Arabia), China’s navy combating Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden to secure an uninterrupted naval route and China’s emerging soft power by propagating Chinese culture and language through Confucian Institutes are evident. China is emerging as a new superpower in the Middle East and steadily replacing the United States and Russia. All indicates the growing influence of China in the Arab world. On the other hand, it is suggested here that through the case of Yemeni presence in China, the credibility of China in the Arab world, and the rise of China as a global trading nation and Asia’s powerhouse, its magnetic effect is attracting a growing number of Arab traders seeking business opportunities in China and Arab students studying in Chinese universities. One of the implications of this paper is to raise the question of how the interpenetration and interactivity of the ‘Arabs in China’ and the ‘Chinese in the Arab world’ are reshaping mutual perceptions and identities during revived Silk Road encounters.

Based on the author’s ethnographic research, interviews as well as collecting various archival documents and reports in Chinese sources, this paper explores Yemen as a case study for understanding the transregional Sino-Arab circuit. There are two reasons why this paper highlights China-Yemen relations. First, it is due to the growing presence of Yemenis in China. Many have already noted the growing presence of Chinese in the Gulf, Africa and the wider Middle East, whereas the rising Arab presence in East Asia, especially in China is much neglected. In terms of the total population of Arabs in China up till 2011, the Yemeni community has become the largest Arab community in China.¹² While there has been longstanding academic focus on the Yemeni diasporic community in the West,¹³ it is through Engseng Ho’s ground-breaking study of Hadrami genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean that one notes the presence of Yemeni diaspora in Southeast Asia,¹⁴ and this paper builds on this tradition by exploring the Yemeni presence in China in particular, which will be a new research agenda carrying important strategic and policy implications. Second, China has an intriguingly strong commitment to Yemen. While many view the collapsing Yemeni economy as another potentially ‘failed state’, China’s attitude seems contrary to this consensus or the conventional understanding. In the wake of the Jasmine Revolution sweeping Yemen in 2011, a national crisis driven by a growing criticism of President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s poor leadership in alleviating poverty and corruption,¹⁵

China did not abandon this old partner. It is likely that the national insecurity prompted by the separatists in Saada in the North and Aden in the South, the threat of terrorism and the infiltration of the al-Qaeda network, are likely to transform Yemen into the new stronghold of jihadists in the Persian Gulf.¹⁶ Nevertheless, such negative mainstream images of Yemen are not putting a dampener on the strong China-Yemen ties. Bilateral trade has been booming since 2002 and reached \$4 billion in 2010 according to the PRC ministry of Commerce, with China as Yemen's largest trading partner since 2005.

At the height of the national crisis in Yemen and in the midst of GCC's negotiation with President Ali Abdullah's schedule of transfer of power, China indicated that investment and discussion of strengthening relations in all areas with Yemen will still continue.¹⁷ Understanding China's access to the Arab world and the growing presence of Yemeni traders in China, past endeavours like Chinese humanitarian reliefs and Yemeni' cultural activities in China, embedded in the social history and everyday interactions between Chinese and Yemenis, go a long way towards explaining China's enduring interest in Yemen.

Chinese Presence in Yemen: Socialist International, Humanitarian Aid & Going Global

"Yemen and China have a very long-standing relationship. Yemeni and Chinese history dates back to 1956, when we first established relations, therefore we have 50 years of shared relations in modern history. So, Yemen was one of the first countries to acknowledge the Peoples Republic of China and to establish relations with it. Last year, we celebrated our 50th year of diplomatic relations".¹⁸

China's outreach to Yemen has often been traced back to the Ming Dynasty when the emperor sent Zheng He's on a voyage from China to the Arab world (1405-1433), during which time he entered Aden five times. But making sense of the modern Yemeni-Chinese transregional linkage would not be possible without considering the shared socialist heritage of the 1950s. The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) was one of the few Arab countries with which China established diplomatic ties at a ministerial level in 1956, although they formed diplomatic relations with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in 1968.¹⁹ This marked the

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establishment of China-Yemen diplomatic ties. Under the national strategy of ‘Going Global’, Yemen was also one of the frontiers that China reached out to in order to engage an international engineering project around the time of the 1979 open door policy.

Due to the devastating civil wars until the Yemen revolution in 1962, China poured resources into humanitarian aid and many nation-building projects for Yemen. Since the revolution and the unification of Yemen, the government made a concerted effort to build roads, hospitals, schools to meet the needs of the Yemeni population and the need for sustained development. Out of the difficulties in the post-civil war reconstruction, China filled the gap by extending a helping hand for the reconstruction of Socialist Yemen. A shared socialist history in the modern period still binds Yemen and China together in the twenty first century. Because of the ideological rivalry between Western-led capitalism and the Soviet-led socialism, China, as a strong socialist supporter, sent tremendous resources in road construction, medical aid, educational support and textile factory technology to Yemen. According to a 2005 interview, the Consul of China in Sana’a and information from the Chinese government in 2011, the Chinese medical team in Yemen is the largest Chinese medical team in the Arab world with approximately 146 medical workers serving eleven medical sites and covering nine provinces from Hudaydah in the North to Abyan in the

South.²⁰ Mr. Gao Youzhen, previously the Chinese Consular representative in the Republic of Yemen, now the Consul-General of Qatar, explained China’s humanitarian medical aid and infrastructural construction in the Socialist Yemen contributed to the nowadays easier access to commercial market and energy exploration in Yemen:

China medical teams now go all over the world, mainly to countries in the Middle East and Africa. The one in Yemen should be regarded as the largest team with so many members in one country. Before the union in 1990, Yemen was split into South Yemen and North Yemen...Currently, the medical team sent to the Northern part comes mainly from Liaoning; the medical team sent to Southern part mainly comes from Anhwei. This time, a 160-strong medical team went to Yemen. The medical team works in Yemen intermittently and its members are replaced consistently. The team members this time worked for two years, before returning to China; then other team members took their places. This situation has been going on for 40 years... All the doctors and nurses sent to Yemen by our medical aid program are highly qualified staff from different hospitals in China. Besides assisting in the evaluation, establishment and treatment of illness, the medical team

*also helps by doing many difficult and important surgeries. Some members of our medical team are working in very tough areas, and their daily eating and living are tough. Yet they do not fear this hardship and still insist on working there. They do this mainly to serve the Yemeni people and to help in the relationship development of the two countries. We should respect them.*²¹

China's medical teams are sent from two provinces of Lioaning and Anhwei in China. In 2008, China sent its Seventieth Chinese Foreign Aid Medical Team to Yemen, serving hospitals in Sana'a, Taiz, Hudaydah, Ibb and Mahwit.²² Owing to the hard work and dedication of Chinese medical workers driven by Maoist ideology from the 1950s, Chinese have earned a respectable status among the Yemeni people:

Yemeni people always say, "Suffering from illness? Find the Chinese Medical Team!" This is because there was very little medical aid from the Western world in Yemen during the 60s. Therefore Yemeni people say "Suffering from illness? Go find the Chinese Medical Team, receive acupuncture, have some Chinese medicine." Many Yemeni people still have this concept in their minds. Regarding our medical teams, we still provide help for the Yemeni people today. Therefore, Yemeni people appreciate the aid of the Chinese

*Medical Team very much. We send medical teams to assist them without being asked. We just want to serve them.*²³

Apart from medical relief, an engineering project that built a highway from Sana'a to Hudaydah has impacted enormously on the social memory of Yemeni society. This road project has been a milestone of Chinese presence in Yemeni society, in which a Chinese engineer Zhang Qiyin sacrificed his life in an accident during the project. Compared to other Arab states, the erection of a Chinese public cemetery in Yemen is unique and marks the deep friendship between Yemenis and the Chinese. In memory of his service and death for Yemeni society, Zhang's gravestone has been erected in Sana'a, where about 56 Chinese people have been buried in the Chinese cemetery during their contributions to Yemeni society for medical service, highway projects and other construction work since 1962. Every year during the Qingming Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day), representatives of the Chinese embassy and Chinese businesses in Yemen place wreathes in the Chinese cemetery of revolutionary martyrs in Sana'a, Figure 1 [薩那中國烈士陵園], showing respect to their dead compatriots for their sacrifices to Yemeni society:

There are several pioneering Chinese works in Yemen. The first is the Yemeni highway from Sana'a to Hudaydah. The total length of the road is around 220km. The segment

on the mountain alone is around 170km; then the segment after the mountain to the harbor city, called Al Hudaydah, is around 50km. This highway was built with the assistance of the Chinese. Starting from 1959, we sent engineers and workers there in order to build the highway. Among them is a most famous engineer called Zhang Qiyin. He sacrificed his life in 1961, in an accident during the road's construction. Yemen and China both deemed that he sacrificed his life not only to build this highway, but also for the friendship between the two countries. He was greatly respected. Later, the Ministry of Communications of China and the Department of Public Works of Yemen jointly wrote a memorial speech and erected a gravestone for him. His history was carved into the gravestone. The cemetery, in a rural part of Sana'a, is at the starting point of the highway from Sana'a to Hudaydah. It is worth visiting because it is a symbol of the relations between China and Yemen, demonstrating the close collaboration and friendship between the two countries. Zhang was the first engineering staff to sacrifice his life in Yemen and be interred there. After that, quite a lot of Chinese have been

interred there over the years. Some of them are from road and bridge company, Chinese Road and Bridge, a company providing materials; some of them are from Chinese building and construction companies; and some of them are from other engineering companies. They were all contracted to some projects in Yemen. Within their service, some Chinese died due to accidents and were also interred in the cemetery of the martyr Zhang Qiyin. Therefore, that grave has grown into a Chinese cemetery which Zhang and others share. Due to the history and dilapidation of the cemetery, our consulate and the Yemeni city government, Sana'a government repaired the cemetery of Zhang Qiyin jointly at the beginning of last year.²⁴



Figure 1: Cemetery for Chinese martyrs & Gravestone of Zhang Qiyin in Sana'a (Source: Photo of the author)

Owing to the sacrifices involved in providing humanitarian aid, the help in building a basic infrastructure and other projects during the formative period of Socialist Yemen, it is easy to see that China has been enjoying a close relationship with Yemen. Thus, it also enables Chinese companies easier and wider access to oil exploration and telecommunication business projects in Yemen. As Chinese nationals, in comparison to other foreigners, are rarely exposed to the threat of kidnappings or become targets of terrorist attacks in Yemen, they can access Yemen more freely. One of my Chinese respondents, who taught Chinese martial arts in Sana'a, attributes it to China's successful foreign policy:

It is true that many attacks on foreigners have happened within these past six years. This is a fact that everyone is aware of. This relates to some political and diplomatic issues...But as a Chinese, from my perspective, Yemeni people respect us very much. Therefore, as Chinese citizens, we do not need to worry about this. Previously, I had a friend who did a great job in commerce, but he does not dare come here owing to this concern, he is always afraid that he will have trouble if he comes. In fact, during these six years, to my knowledge, there has only been one case where a Chinese national was kidnapped, but that was because he was mistaken for Japanese. Later, when they found out that he was

*Chinese, they treated him with great respect, treated him well, and sent him back. This is the only exceptional case, and no other cases of kidnapping or anyone attacking Chinese can be found. In fact, as a Chinese, from my perspective, our reputation is quite good: friendly, good and diligent. This shows the diplomatic policy of China is relatively successful.*²⁵

Until 2005 the total Chinese population in Yemen was around 700 including embassy staff. Since then the number of Chinese in Yemen has been increasing, particularly in the business sector. According to recent data, the total number of Chinese people in Yemen had reached 2,000 in the 2010s. Indeed, Yemen has been so important that in 2008, the Vice President of China, Xi Jinping visited Yemen and officially inaugurated a new building for the Yemeni Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sana'a, which was constructed and donated by the Chinese government. China pledged several projects for Yemen to strengthen the bilateral and friendly relations between both countries. For example, China committed to engage in a project to renew the facilities of a textile factory in Yemen, the Typical 48th Revolutionary Hospital project, the Great National Library in the capital Sana'a will be constructed and donated by the Chinese government, and other similar Chinese state-sponsored projects have been planned. When compared with other Arab countries, China's consistent humanitarian and financial aid to Yemen brands China's national image and China as Yemen's trustworthy friend, as experienced by a Chinese respondent who studied Arabic in Sana'a:

But if you focus on Yemeni teachers,

*people in Yemen generally treat Chinese relatively well. They feel that China...they gradually understand that China will further develop and prosper. China gives quite a lot of financial assistance to Yemen. For instance, when the President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, visited China the year before last [2006], China donated almost three billion U.S. dollars to Yemen. Therefore, due to all these kinds of things, no matter the angle being politics or economics, Chinese create a very good image in the eyes of Yemeni people.*²⁶

Arguably, building on the Maoist inspiration in support of the Socialist Yemen society, and the humanitarian and financial aid of the Chinese government to the Yemeni society, have laid the foundations for the penetration of China entrepreneurship and the search for energy resources in contemporary Yemen. Most importantly, the strong Chinese presence in Yemen, driven by the socialist legacy, has been a factor behind Yemenis reaching out to China. It also partly explains the increasing presence of the Yemeni community in China.

Yemeni Presence in China: Islamic Hadith, Seeking Knowledge & Doing Business unto China

Yemen and China have had a long maritime connection with ocean travel between Aden and Guangzhou, and the presence of the Yemeni community in China goes back to the Tang Dynasty.²⁷ In the sixth national population census of November 2010, the PRC government has still not included ‘foreigners’ in the official census and has not released the population count of foreigners in China,²⁸ but at a conservative estimation there are more than 20,000 people of Arab ethnicity in Guangzhou, where most go to do business in China.²⁹ In contrast, where half the new expatriates of other origins leave China early due to maladjustment to the lifestyle in China,³⁰ the Arab and especially Yemeni expatriate community in China has been expanding. According to official information from the Cultural-Consul of the Yemeni Consulate in China,³¹ Yemenis now comprise the largest Arab community in China, followed by two other large Arab communities, namely the Sudanese and Egyptians. As China has become the new ‘trading nation’ in the developing world,³² the magnetic effect of business opportunities in China has attracted businessmen and traders from all over the world to China. Given the Arab optimism and positive perception of China’s economic rise³³ plus the difficulties Middle Eastern businesses face when trying to invest in the West, more and more business traders from the Middle East are embarking on exploration of long-distance business opportunities in

China.³⁴ Most of the Yemenis in China are from Taiz and Ibb, and the largest Yemeni community is in Wuhan, while many settle in Yiwu and Guangzhou, with a smattering in Xian, Tianjin, Beijing and many other cities in China. Aside from business, the Islamic and legacy of the Arabic language is also crucial in terms of inter-cultural exchange. For example, Ningxia is traditionally ranked as one of the most important Islamic centres in China. Different from the practice of limiting Muslim women in the private sphere, one striking and liberal practice in China's Islam is the public leadership of Muslim women, which is characterized by the long history of a women's mosque led by a female Imam.³⁵ Conventionally, the children of Hui Muslim families are supposed to learn the Qur'an and Arabic at an early age, however their Arabic proficiency and knowledge of Islam is often basic. Legitimized by the public role of Muslim women plus the growing Chinese-Middle Eastern ties, there is a growing demand for learning Arabic at a more professional level. In addition, learning Arabic is also viewed as one possible path for upward social mobility:

In Ningxia, where individual rural incomes hover around \$315USD per year, more young Muslim women see learning Arabic as a way out of poverty. "It gives them a chance for employment," said Ma Mingxian, vice principal of the Institute for the Study of Islam and the Koran in the regional capital of Yinchuan. "A woman can be a translator, a teacher, or she can go on to study Islam at a higher level." Ms. Ma's institute

*started accepting female students in 1992. Now 118 girls are enrolled and Ms. Ma is turning away applicants for lack of space.*³⁶

Apart from the business ties between China and the Middle East, there is a growing Arab community in China for academic reasons. Many of them come to study in China. To date, there has been about 500 Yemeni students studying at different universities in China. For example, this respondent is sponsored by a Chinese government scholarship to study medicine in China:

*Okay, now I tell you I'm taking the scholarship, so I found China is a very very good place, the Chinese people, Chinese classmates and the Chinese teachers, are all honest people and it, is very easy to become close with them. I feel very very happy to stay here in China as a student, I can tell you there are no difficulties, no difficulties, no bad things, nothing to prevent me staying here in Guangzhou. I appreciate this for the Chinese people, I appreciate the Chinese government, I appreciate the friendship between Yemen and China.*³⁷

Many of them have positive experiences in their direct encounters and understanding of Chinese society after a Chinese government sponsored visit. Asking a young Yemeni who visited China several times, whether his perception of China changed at all before and after going to China, I was told:

About the Chinese people and China when I visited? Before, I had the

*wrong idea about China. About the people,...I didn't think that the Chinese people were friendly. But I got the wrong idea, I think. I was so surprised when I saw how friendly they are. And I hope that I go to China again.*³⁸

In addition to China's foreign policy in attracting young Arab minds to study in China, some come to China for their own academic work, helping Chinese students to foster their Arabic language and Islamic knowledge. The growing demand because of the closer China-Middle East link, has created a niche for native Arabic speakers to teach in Chinese academic institutes. Coming from Yemen, Shaman has been serving as the Arabic tutor of the Ningxia Islamic Academy. In the interview from *France 24 International News*, Shaman spoke about her teaching of young Hui girls:

*I teach these students how to speak Arabic. Most of them come here knowing very little. But they are better by their second year. By the third year, the students start to be able to converse in the language and by the final year my students are able to get a job and converse properly with native Arabic speakers.*³⁹

The experience of Arabic teacher Shaman not only reveals the Islamic link between China's Muslims and the Arab world, for China's Muslims, the religious authority of Islam lies in the Arab world, it also indicates the neglected potential for Arabs to contribute to Chinese society. If teaching Arabic is one dimension of the Yemeni contribution, learning from Chinese society is another important factor that

pulls many Yemenis into staying in China. In addition to the growing number of Arab traders from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf cities, the Yemeni and Chinese governments have signed various agreements to enhancing cultural exchanges. In particular, scholarships have been given to support Yemeni students studying in China. From information given by the Cultural-Consul of the Yemeni Embassy in Beijing, Yemeni students are studying in China in disciplines such as medicine, engineering, finance and Chinese language. To Yemen, China is viewed as a rising cultural centre they prefer to learn from:

*The Chinese, as in the people in the street, are very very very kind people, they are polite and happy when you speak to them. They try to help you, they want to help you but don't know how to do it because of language. Every time, when someone speaks English, someone wants to come to explain and help the African people. The officials, the people in the government are also very polite and explain things politely and give us everything good. The Chinese government tries to help Yemen. They give a lot, not just a one month summit or something like that, but a lot of scholarships to Yemeni students. They study in China, a lot of people from Yemen. They study there in China. It makes the relationship between the two countries stronger.*⁴⁰

Visiting Chinese society also brings about some new learning experiences for many Yemeni, for example, a Yemeni civil servant as well as an Arabic teacher

describes his encounters during his training tour in China:

In China I learnt a lot of things. I noticed that people are not materialistic. They don't just think money, money, like what we see in the movies, of American life. No! There is the feeling that people think about people. I learnt a lot in China... we learn a lot from the Chinese...Yes...Chinese work hard and are patient. The Yemeni people try to learn what's going on now in China that the Chinese change their minds. They start to use the economy, and try to choose a new way of life by concentrating on the economy. The people now try to do the same. I notice Chinese people give their culture more importance. The government in China tries to give their farmers more support. And Yemeni people, I noticed from my work, the Yemeni government tries to support the farmers by ways of the China way...They took us to the museum a lot, they explained to us patiently, and explained slowly, all the history of China. And I like it, they explained about how these families held in China all time ago. And we go to these important places in China, I forget its name, it's a difficult name, but it's important. We saw horses, models of stone, and soldiers, a lot a

*lot a lot of soldiers. [Terracotta Army]...*⁴¹

Possibly, the Yemeni respondents romanticize about the harsh reality of China, it is doubtless the positive Yemeni' perception of the Chinese people as hard-working, principled and polite, coupled by China's strong economy and its positive attitude towards, peasants provide the Yemeni government a prototype to follow – an alternative model for the Arab national development.⁴² For Yemenis, the experience of visiting and living in China allows them to imitate the 'China model' away from the long-standing Western template of the 'Washington consensus'. Most recently, the Yemeni government determined that they are bringing Chinese culture into formal schooling by setting up a Chinese language centre in Sana'a University and a Confucius Institute in Yemen.

Ordinary Lives in Aden and Guangzhou: Transforming Identity and the New Global Asymmetry



Figure 2: Ching Sing Chinese Restaurant in Aden
(Source: Photo of the author)

While conducting research concerning China's presence in Yemen, a biographical interview with Jameel Shina, who is a representative Chinese witnessing the changing history of Yemen and particularly Aden, took place.⁴³ Jameel Shina is the co-owner of Ching Sing restaurant, the only Chinese restaurant in Aden, Yemen.⁴⁴ Jameel Shina is perhaps the only Chinese with a Yemeni passport and has lived in Aden for half of a century. Ching Sing restaurant was opened by Jameel's father who was a seaman in 1963. In 1942 during World War II, Jameel Shina's father was forced to stay in Yemen when the British navy was bombed by the German army. Born in China, he was brought by his mother to Aden in 1948 when he was two years old. As Aden was a protectorate of the British Imperial Empire, Jameel Shina received a British education, while acquiring fluent Arabic. Expecting Jameel Shina and his six siblings to learn Chinese, his father sent him back to Hong Kong for his formal schooling in 1958 for a year but he then returned to Yemen. Jameel Shina remembers a large Chinese community in Aden of about 300 people in 1950. Jameel Shina is now the only Chinese person living permanently in Aden, although there has been large number of transient workers from China. Throughout the British colonial rule to the independence movement, then the civil war between North-South Yemen and finally the reunification of Yemen in the 1990s, Jameel Shina concludes that Yemeni society now enjoys greater freedom but the business environment in Aden is deteriorating. As a witness of the

upheavals of Yemeni society for half of a century, his hybrid identity of Chinese-Yemeni is ridiculed by his Chinese friends in Hong Kong. He is frustrated by his Yemeni passport as his Yemeni identity gives him much trouble when travelling to Hong Kong to visit his family. Facing the declining economy of Aden and the instability in Yemen, Jameel Shina told me he decided to close the only Chinese restaurant in Aden.



Figure 3: Tianxiu Building and Saba Restaurant in Guangzhou (Source: Photo of the author)

Situated in the Tianxiu Building of Guangzhou, Saba restaurant is a famous restaurant serving as a hub for Yemeni and other Arab traders to gather. The legendary success of the Yemeni restaurant has even been reported by a local newspaper in Guangzhou:

Ali Ismail Mahyuddin, who came from Yemen to Guangzhou in 2000, is now running a trading business from the Tianxiu building. In 2001, He found that more and more foreigners like himself had settled around the Tianxiu building. He planned and then started up his first Muslim

*restaurant on the first floor of the Tianxiu building. Being the manager of both a trading company and a restaurant is hard work. It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon when our reporter arrived at his restaurant and he was busy serving his customers. He told our reporter that his restaurant mainly offers Middle Eastern and African Muslim food. In order to get an authentic flavor, he hired two cooks from his homeland. His restaurant is doing good business. He told us that his restaurant can earn several thousand Yuan almost every day, and the profits can increase considerably during the Trade Fair.*⁴⁵

During my visit the Saba restaurant (Figure 3), I met the owner of the Saba restaurant Ali Ismail Mahyuddin, who is a Yemeni, the author notes the Arabic design of the restaurant, and that al-Jazeera television programmes are broadcast in order to attract Arab and Chinese customers. Before inaugurating the restaurant in China, he was a trader in Indonesia for more than 10 years. Prior to the 2000s, the Tianxiu building was removed from the usual business opportunities taken up Arab traders, but he decided to invest and rent the flat to start a pioneering business. Contemplating the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, Ali Ismail Mahyuddin observed that the South Asian and African traders had already shifted their attention to Guangzhou. By that

time, there were over 200 Yemeni traders doing business between the Middle East and China in Guangzhou, but there was lack of any Middle Eastern and African restaurants in Guangzhou to cater for the Arab community. The inauguration of Saba restaurant serving large varieties of Halal and Arab style food, attracted more Arab traders to gather in Guangzhou and Saba has become a meeting place for business deals and exchanging business information. Like the growing Chinese economy, the Saba restaurant business is improving every year. For Ali Ismail Mahyuddin and many other Yemeni traders, China has become their home. According to the statistics of the *Egypt-China Business Council in South China 2007*, there are about half a million non-Chinese foreigners registered there and 20,000 Arabs in Guangzhou. The Yemeni population in Guangzhou had already exceeded 5,000 in 2010, according to the official information from Mr. Abd Almalek Almalemy, the Yemen Consul-General in China.⁴⁶ While interviewing two Yemeni merchants in Saba restaurant, I was informed that most of the Yemeni traders stayed in China temporarily for business dealings between Saudi Arabia and China, but not yet bringing the whole family to China for good.⁴⁷ Given the vibrant transportation and communications of the new Silk Road linking Sana'a and Dubai in the Middle East to Guangzhou in China, a new air route between the Middle East and China was launched in 2010. Also a new Yemeni consulate will be likely set up in Guangzhou after the establishment of a

Consulate-General in Beijing and an Honorary Yemen consulate in Hong Kong, in order to facilitate the flourishing Sino-Arab trade connections. Figure 4 shows a Guangzhou government service centre set up to manage the growing number of non-Chinese foreigners with translations of Arabic, French and English.



Figure 4: Visitors Management Service at Guangzhou
(Source: Photo of the author)

Situating two ends of the maritime silk route, ordinary life stories between Ching Sing restaurant in Aden and Saba restaurant in Guangzhou remarkably illuminate the asymmetrical flow of capital and relationship between Yemen and China, two ends of Asia's Silk Road. Business stories of Jameel Shina's desperation in continuing the only Chinese restaurant in Aden and Ali Ismail Mahyiddin's flourishing success in Guangzhou reflects the larger picture of economic transformation in Yemen and China. In the post-Socialist Yemen, Jameel Shina experienced the declining business economy after the British left Aden and the political power of Sana'a dominated and marginalized the coastal city of Aden. Quite to the contrary, the success of Ali Ismail Mahyiddin's business is a reflection of the rising Chinese economy with the influx of Arab traders exploring unprecedented business opportunities in China.

Conclusion: Multi-sited Ethnography, the Transregional Circuit & New Silk Road Network

*I know that the relations between China and Arab countries grow from day to day. For example, Sudan now, very strong relation. I am very happy. I want all Arab countries will be in this good relation with China because China is all friend for Arab countries. I think for more than 60 years, we have relation with China. And I hope it will...all countries, Arab countries, will have relation, good relation with China.*⁴⁸

In his book, Simpfendorfer brilliantly argues how the dual rise and the strengthening of ties with China and the Arab world indicates the world's centre of gravity has subtly shifted from the West to the East. It is then strategically important to observe the 'global rebalancing'⁴⁹ through the spectacle of the changing China-Arab world relationship. As China is steadily transforming into a potential superpower that will impact on the political economy of the Middle East, it is through such multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork and interviews both in Yemen and China that one can show the historical importance of Chinese humanitarian aid, basic infrastructure and other engineering projects that sealed the formative period of modern Yemen and laid the strong foundation for the Sino-Yemen relationship

which is rooted in the 1950s. It is not only the underlying reason China has been enjoying wider access to energy exploration projects, Yemen is welcoming China's expanding market share due to the good national image of China as well as the better security status of Chinese over Yemen. It also explains why China's attitude differs from the West in its perceptions and strategies regarding Yemen, and not perceiving it a collapsing state threatened by civil war and terrorism. Most importantly, it also explores an ignored dimension of 'the Arab world in China'. It seeks to understand the pull factors that are attracting a swelling Yemeni diaspora heading towards China, driven mainly by business opportunities in China, the new development model in the 'Beijing consensus' and the Islamic authority to teach Muslim Chinese. Through the stories of the lives of Jameel Shina and Ali Ismail Mahyiddin, it also illuminates the frontier of initiatives among non-state actors within the transregional circuit of Yemen and China. Going beyond the conventional narratives and macroscopic issues like energy cooperation and military-trades, these personal accounts serve alternative interpretations of the revived everyday interactions between Arabs and Chinese in the new but asymmetrical Silk Road network.

Notes

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